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ABSTRACT

This brief review summarizes "What's Happening in Teacher Testing," a report from the U.S. Department of Education which provides information on teacher testing programs already in place. The report includes articles on testing and related areas, such as the history of teacher testing, legal considerations, and teacher supply and demand. Information on ordering the report is presented. (JD)

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Research in Brief

Chester E. Finn, Jr., Assistant Secretary

William J. Bennett, Secretary

What's Happening in Teacher Testing

"To test or not to test?" That is a question animating fierce debates among those for and against teacher testing. In the last 5 years, every State in the Nation has examined this issue, and the general verdict is a resounding "Yes!" This, in turn, has generated other questions: What types of exams are being used in the 34 States that have already introduced teacher testing? What do the tests test? What are the virtues and drawbacks of such tests? Do they accurately gauge the competence of a potential (or practicing) teacher? What challenges confront teachers, administrators, and policymakers involved in these decisions? Where is teacher testing headed?

The U.S. Department of Education has released *What's Happening in Teacher Testing*, an analysis of some of these questions that provides accurate, objective, and timely information on testing programs already in place. Developed by the Department's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, the report includes articles on testing and related areas, such as the history of teacher testing, legal considerations, and teacher supply and demand, written by a number of experts in the field.

The study defines four types of teacher exams: admissions tests, certification tests, recertification tests, and performance evaluations. Prospective teachers take admissions tests before entering training programs that are usually in colleges and universities, while certification tests are administered either after the training program or before initial certification. Some classroom teachers must pass a recertification test and receive on-the-job performance evaluations as a condition for continued employment.

The most common exam is the certification test, which 44 States use or plan to use. Admissions tests are also becoming popular, with 27 States already administering them. Although only seven States give performance evaluations, another 17 intend to institute them. Recertification tests are rare and are presently required in only three States.

Many people view testing as an important mechanism for monitoring the quality of teachers. In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* pointed out that "too few academically able students are being attracted to teaching," and "too many teachers are being drawn from the bottom quarter" of college graduates. Many believe that administering one or more types of teacher tests will help solve these problems by screening out unqualified candidates and, thus, strengthening the teaching profession. In this way, proponents argue, a more qualified teaching force will improve the overall quality of American education.

Understandably, testing is controversial. Too often, the debate between those eager for improvements (administrators, State policymakers, and parents) and those faced with a possible threat to their livelihood (teachers and prospective teachers) degenerates into bickering, sometimes into lawsuits. Nevertheless, public support for teacher testing remains high. A 1986 Gallup Poll of the public's attitudes toward various aspects of education showed that 85 percent of the respondents felt that prospective teachers should be required to pass a State exam in the subjects they intend to teach.

Recently, Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton argued that the need to increase public confidence in American education outweighs the resistance to examinations:

> To those who feel insulted by the test, I can only reply that I think it is a small price to pay in exchange for the biggest tax increase for education in Arkansas history, and for the contribution the testing process would make in our efforts to restore the teaching profession to the position of public trust and esteem it deserves.

Despite such strong endorsements, opponents consistently stress the drawbacks to teacher testing. *What's Happening in Teacher Testing* examines two: 1) exams may increase teacher shortages by discouraging applicants from entering the field, and 2) they may reduce the number of minority group members in the profession.

Proponents contend that the purpose of testing is to ensure that only those who are best qualified enter and stay in the profession. They argue that people ill-equipped to teach should not.

The fact that many minority group members often fail these tests at a disproportionate rate is a problem that receives special attention in *What's Happening in Teacher Testing*. According to the report, only "23 percent of blacks and 34 percent of Hispanics ... passed the Texas admissions test between March 1984 and March 1985. [And] in Louisiana, only 10 percent of students graduating from predominantly black colleges between 1978 and 1984 passed the certification test." In 1980, minority teachers made up 12.5 percent of the national teaching force, but this proportion could fall to as low as 5 percent by 1990

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if trends in enrollment and attrition rates continue. Bernard Gifford, dean of education at the University of California, Berkeley, and the author of one article in the report, suggests ways to increase numbers of minority teachers. These ways include early recruitment and intensive training of qualified minority and low-income students.

What's Happening in Teacher Testing also looks at other arguments against examining teachers. Testing alone may not improve teacher quality; the tests may be an overreaction to a problem that does not exist; and some tests may provide too low a standard for judging teachers.

"Content and Difficulty of a Teacher Certification Examination," a chapter written by Lawrence M. Rudner the project director, examines the latter issue in full. Using the National Teacher Examinations (NTE) test as an example, Rudner concludes that the "[c] ore battery tests are not difficult," and only test "basic reading, writing, and listening skills needed to teach effectively." Furthermore, after examining the process of setting passing scores in States and districts, he concludes that "most States have made sizable adjustments to allow for errors in measurement," which have resulted in passing scores as low as 35 percent of possible answers.

The report provides a detailed, State-by-State rundown of the current status of teacher testing. It shows that more testing will emerge over the next few years. In 1989, for example, Wisconsin will implement an admissions test and Massachusetts will begin a certification test. In other places, additional initiatives will build on teacher testing programs already in use.

One such initiative on the national level has been the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy's creation of a National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. This board is currently developing standards by which to recognize master teachers.

The proponents of teacher testing have won the initial skirmishes, but the battle is far from over. The trend toward more testing will continue over the coming years, and so will the challenges.

Single copies of *What's Happening in Teacher Testing* are available for $7.50 from the Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office (GPO), Washington, D.C. 20402. GPO stock number for the publication is 065-000-003606-6. When ordering books from GPO, checks should be made out to the "Superintendent of Documents."

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